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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships of early and current attachment styles to the coping strategies late adolescents employ when faced with problems and to the attributions they make concerning their successes and failures. Subjects were 157 late adolescents, ages 18 to 22, taken from an ethnically diverse sample of university students. Subjects completed self-report measures of early attachment to parents and current attachment orientation with respect to non-parental relations. Subjects also completed Seligman's Attributional Style Questionnaire along with the COPE inventory of support seeking, planning, and acting. Correlational and multivariate analyses revealed that early parental attachments continue to exert a modest effect on adolescents' coping strategies and attributional style, but exclusively along gender lines. Greater early security of boys with their fathers was associated with a higher likelihood of turning to others for emotional and instrumental support. Greater early security of girls with their mothers was associated with a higher likelihood of seeking emotional support from others and with more self-enhancing attributions for success and failures. Findings are discussed in terms of theoretical links among coping, attributions, and working models of self and others. (MM)

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Attachment, Coping, and Attributional Style in Late Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Late adolescent males and females (n = 157) from an ethnically diverse sample of university students (age 18-22) took self-report measures of early attachment to parents and current attachment orientation with respect to non-parental others along with the Carver et al. COPE Inventory and Seligman's Attributional Style Questionnaire. Correlational and multivariate analyses uncovered predicted relations between quality of attachment and problem-focused coping with stressful situations, coping by seeking social support, and self-enhancing attributions for success and failure. Findings were discussed in terms of theoretical links among coping, attributions, and working models of self and others.

INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory, which originated in studies of the mother-infant relationship, is now widely viewed as having applications across the lifespan. The early experiences of infants with their caregivers have been proposed to influence subsequent well-being and behavior through their influence on "working models" of the self and others.

Early experiences lay the foundation for the child's mental model of self and others and exert a selective effect on the child's future experiences. As these experiences reflect the working model, they may also serve to reinforce it. On the other hand, working models, formed in childhood, are not cast in stone. Working models may change for better or for worse as

life experiences expand. Thus, early parental attachment style and current attachment style both may contribute to an understanding of behavior.

The current study advances attachment research by examining its relevance to coping and attributional styles. More specifically, we examine the relations of early and current attachment styles to the coping strategies late adolescents employ when faced with problems and to the attributions they make concerning their successes and failures.

HYPOTHESES

- Higher overall quality of EARLY ATTACHMENT TO PARENTS will be positively associated with coping strategies of SEEKING EMOTIONAL AND INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT and of PLANNING and ACTING, independent of the effects of security in current, nonparental relationships.

Rationale:

The working model of responsive and helpful others should lead to greater readiness to turn to people for both emotional support and instrumental assistance.

The working model of a competent self should prompt direct efforts to deal with problems.

Early parental relationships should have enduring consequences.

- Early MATERNAL attachment will be more strongly related to coping by SEEKING EMOTIONAL AND INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT from others than will early PATERNAL attachment.

  Rationale:

  This prediction is based on the greater salience of the maternal relationship in the care of young children in this culture.

- The security of CURRENT relationships also will be related to coping by SUPPORT-SEEKING.

  Rationale:

  Current security in non-parental (especially peer) relationships is expected to be more strongly related than early parental attachment styles to coping by seeking social support. In light of expectations that late adolescents should turn to increasingly to their peers for support in times of distress, the quality of current attachments to non-parental others should show stronger association with coping style than should early relationships with parents.

- EARLY and CURRENT SECURITY will be associated with a favorable ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE.

Rationale:

Individuals with greater security in early and current attachments will attribute their successes, more than their failures, to causes that are internal, global, and stable. The working model of self as an active and competent agent is expected to be responsible for this association.

PLAN OF ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression. Order of entry of variables was as follows:

Step 1. SEX

Step 2. OMAQ (Overall Maternal Attachment Quality)

OPAQ (Overall Paternal attachment Quality)

CURRATTACH: (Security of Current Attachment Style)

Step 3. SEX X OMAQ

SEX X OPAQ

Dependent Variables:

COPE/EMOSPT (Emotional Support Seeking)

COPE/INSTR (Instrumental Support Seeking)

COPE/PLANACT (Planning and Acting)

COMPOSITE ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE

SUBJECTS

SEX:

50 MALES

107 FEMALES

AGE:

18-22 YEARS, MEAN = 20.13

ETHNICITY:

49.4% CAUCASIAN

26.9% ASIAN-AMERICAN

7.7% LATINO

7.1% PACIFIC ISLANDER

3.8% AFRICAN-AMERICAN

5.1% OTHER

PROCEDURE

All measures were administered in a questionnaire session lasting less than one hour. Subjects participated for extra course credit.

MEASURES OF ATTACHMENT

Early Attachments (adapted from Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991 and Hazan & Shaver, 1987):

For each parent separately, subjects rated each of four styles from 1 (not all accurate) to 7 (extremely accurate) to describe the quality of their early childhood relationship to mother and to father. Composite scores, based on the four items, were created to reflect Overall Maternal and Paternal Attachment Quality (OMAQ, alpha = .85; OPAQ alpha = .77).

Current Attachments to Others:

Subjects rated themselves on each of four descriptions of current attachment to others from 1 (not at all accurate) to 7 (extremely accurate).

STYLES OF ATTACHMENT

STYLES	EARLY ATTACHMENT	CURRENT ATTACHMENT
SECURE	Parent was warm and responsive	Subject does not fear abandonment, is at ease with closeness to others and depending on others
AVOIDANT	Parent was cold and distant	Subject prefers not to get close to or depend on others, wants to remain "self-sufficient"
PREOCCUPIED	Parent was inconsistent and unpredictable	Subject wants very much to be close and to depend on others but fears abandonment
FEARFUL	Parent was harsh, critical, frightening	Subject is too fearful of getting hurt to allow him/herself to get close to or to depend on others

COPING SUBSCALES: SAMPLE ITEMS

(The COPE Inventory, Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989)

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT SEEKING: "I try to get sympathy and understanding from someone." (alpha = .90)

INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT SEEKING: "I try to get advice from someone about what to do." (alpha = .80)

PLANNING/ACTING: "I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it." (alpha = .85)

ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE: SAMPLE ITEMS

(Attributional Style Questionnaire, Seligman, 1984)

(+) YOU GET A RAISE AT WORK. (Success Event)

(-) YOU GO ON A DATE AND IT GOES BADLY. (Failure Event)

What is the most likely cause if this happened to you?

Internality: Cause entirely due to me vs. others (rated 1 to 7)

Stability: Cause will always be present in the future (rated 1 to 7)

Globality: Cause influences other events (rated 1 to 7)

Composite score reflects the extent to which self-enhancing attributions for success events exceed self-blaming attributions for failure events: Positive minus Negative (alpha = .76)

RESULTS

COPING BY SEEKING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:

- Neither early mother nor early father attachments exerted a significant main effect on this outcome measure.
- There were SIGNIFICANT INTERACTIONS between gender of respondent and measures of early attachment to parents: For GIRLS, seeking emotional support was predicted by a higher quality of early MATERNAL attachment; for BOYS, by a higher quality of early PATERNAL attachment.
- Differences in this coping style were largely due to differences in CURRENT SECURITY of attachment to others.

COPING BY SEEKING INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT:

- As with emotional support-seeking, early mother and father relationships did not exert significant main effects on INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT-SEEKING.
- Again, there was a SIGNIFICANT INTERACTION by gender: A higher quality of early PATERNAL relationship was related to a greater tendency of BOYS to seek instrumental support when distressed.
- CURRENT SECURITY of attachment was the strongest predictor of this coping strategy.

COPING BY PLANNING AND ACTING:

- CURRENT SECURITY also was the major predictor of coping by PLANNING and ACTING.
- There were no significant main or interaction effects involving early parental attachments.

ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE:

- Although early parental attachments did not predict attributional style for the sample as a whole, a significant INTERACTION effect emerged: GIRLS with a higher quality of early MATERNAL attachment made more self-enhancing attributions.
- SECURITY OF CURRENT ATTACHMENTS was a significant predictor of favorable attributional style.

DISCUSSION

The importance of current relationship quality to nonparental others in predicting late adolescents' coping strategies and attribution style suggests that individuation from parents is well along the way by this point in the life span, and that intimacy with nonparental others plays a key role in organizing emotion and cognition about self and others.

The failure of early parental relationship quality to predict late adolescents' coping strategies or attributional styles, coupled with the strong and significant effects of current security of attachment to nonparental others on these outcomes, suggests that early working models of self and others have been substantially transformed by late adolescence. The

fact that this is a relatively high-functioning (college-attending) sample of young people is no doubt relevant to this finding.

Early parental attachments do continue to exert a unique but modest effect on adolescents' coping strategies and attributional style, but exclusively along gendered lines. Greater early security of boys with their fathers is associated with a higher likelihood of turning to others for both emotional and instrumental support. Greater early security of girls with their mothers is associated with a higher likelihood of seeking emotional support from others and with more self-enhancing attributions for success and failures. Understanding how these "same-sex" effects operate, perhaps via the identification process, requires further study.

Correlations among Measures of Attachment, Coping, and Attributions

	OMAQ	OPAQ	CURRENT SECURITY	COPE EMOT	COPE INSTR	COPE PLANACT	ATTRIB POS-NEG
OMAQ	___	.26*	.25***	.18*	.16+	.17*	.20*
	___	.45***	.14	.00	.20	.21	-.07
	___	.20*	.31***	.30**	.17	.15*	.31**
OPAQ		___	.13	.13	.02	.08	.16+
		___	.17	.31*	.24	.06	.21
		___	.09	-.02	-.11	.11	.12
CURRENT SECURITY			___	.38***	.30***	.24**	.25**
			___	.36*	.29*	.28+	.14
			___	.37***	.30**	.23*	.29*
COPE-EMOT				___	.75***	.22**	.24**
				___	.66***	.31*	.29+
				___	.80***	.23*	.21*
COPE-INSTR					___	.44***	.22**
					___	.57***	.12
					___	.40***	.25*
COPE-PLANACT						___	.42***
						___	.43**
						___	.42
ATTRIB. POS-NEG							___
							___
							___

Note. The first line of figures in each block is for all Ss combined; the second line, for males only; the third line, for females only.

* p <.05 ** p <.01 *** p <.001

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

Average Item Means and Standard Deviations for all Measures

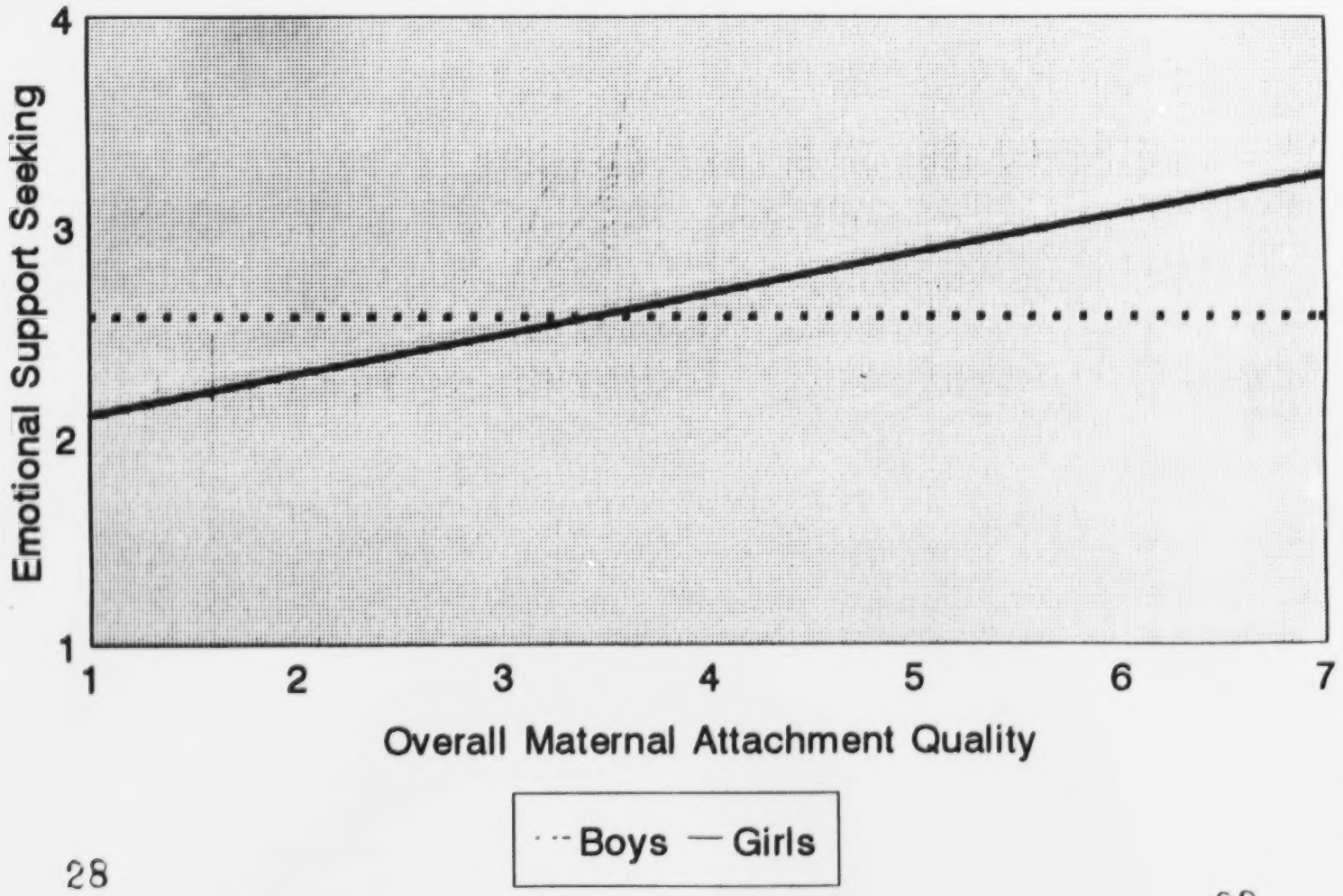
	All Item Mean	SD	Males Item Mean	SD	Females Item Mean	SD
Measure						
Overall Maternal Attachment Quality (7-point scale)	6.09	1.12	6.26	.91	6.01	1.20
Overall Paternal Attachment Quality (7-point scale)	5.69	1.32	5.49	1.50	5.78	1.22
Current Rel'ship Quality (7-point scale)	4.57	1.71	4.38	1.80	4.67	1.60
Coping by Seeking Emot. Support (4-point scale)	2.90	.81	2.58	.76	3.05	.80
Coping by Seeking Inst. Support (4-point scale)	2.94	.69	2.85	.67	2.98	.70
Coping by Planning/Acting (4-point scale)	3.02	.51	3.08	.51	2.99	.51
Attributional Style (Pos-Neg) (7-point scale)	4.05	2.97	3.71	2.92	4.21	3.00

REGRESSION OF COPING STRATEGIES AND ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE ON MEASURES OF SECURITY OF ATTACHMENT

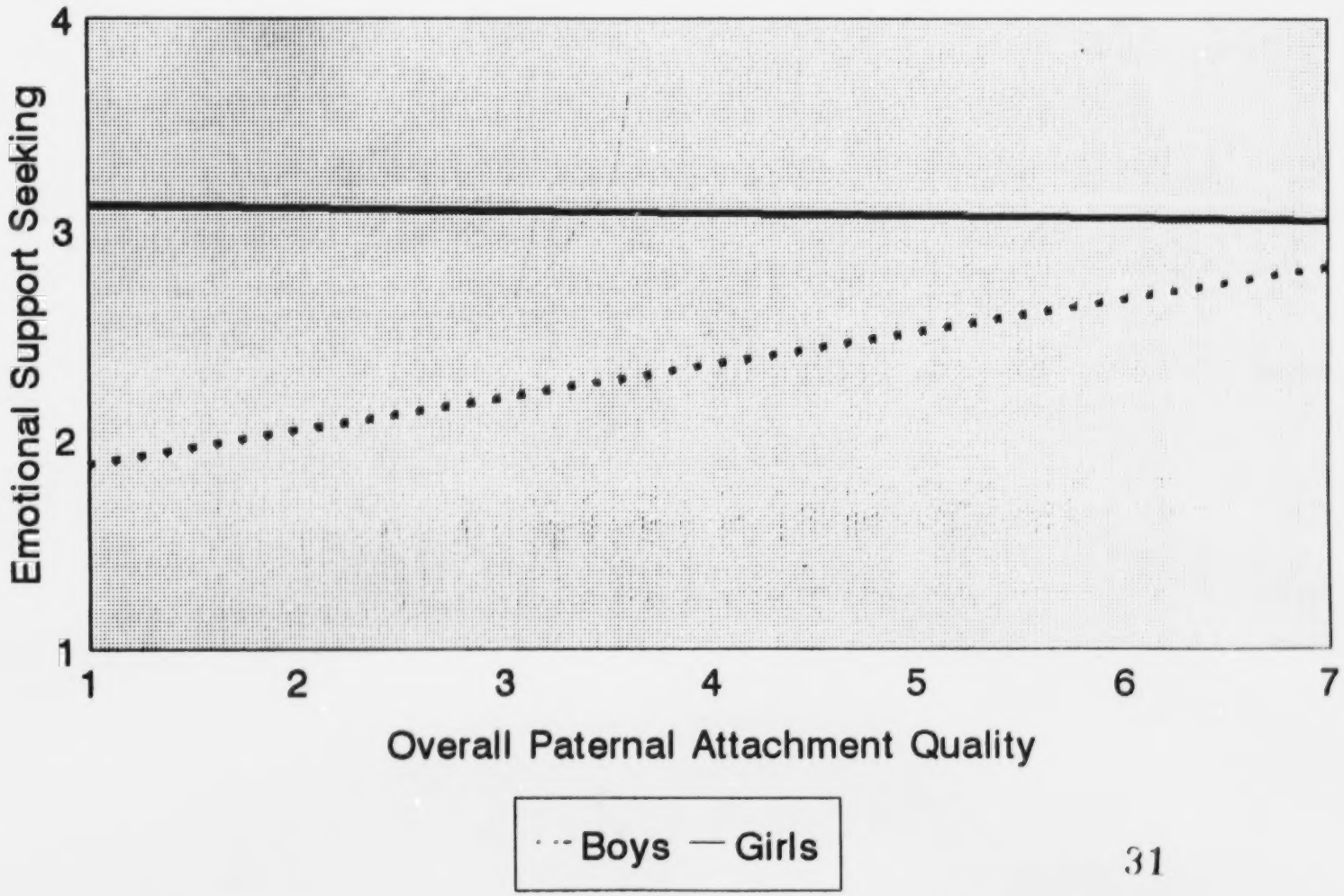
	Seeks Emotional Support		Seeks Instrumental Support		Plans/Acts on Problem		Composite Attributional Style	
Step 1	Beta	Signif. of t	Beta	Signif. of t	Beta	Signif. of t	Beta	Signif. of t
Sex	.20	p < .05	.07	NS	-.08	NS	-.00	NS
	Adj.R^2 = .07***		Adj.R^2 = .01, NS		Adj.R^2 = .00, NS		Adj.R^2 = -.01, NS	
Step 2								
OMAQ	.07	NS	.09	NS	.11	NS	.07	NS
OPAQ	.03	NS	-.11	NS	.03	NS	.11	NS
Secure Cur. Att.	.31	p < .001	.29	p < .001	.23	p < .01	.18	p < .05
	ΔR^2 = .14		ΔR^2 = .10		ΔR^2 = .07		ΔR^2 = .08	
	Adj.R^2 = .20***		Adj.R^2 = .09**		Adj.R^2 = .05*		Adj.R^2 = .05*	
Step 3								
Sex x OMAQ	-.18	p < .05	.02	NS	.09	NS	-.22	p < .05
Sex x OPAQ	.19	p < .05	.18	p < .05	-.06	NS	.12	NS
	ΔR^2 = .04		ΔR^2 = .03		ΔR^2 = .01		ΔR^2 = .04	
	Adj.R^2 = .23***		Adj.R^2 = .10**		Adj.R^2 = .04 +		Adj.R^2 = .08*	

Note. Values of beta and t are those at the final step: i.e., with all variables included in the equation.
+ p ≤ .07 *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Emotional Support Seeking By OMAQ for Boys and Girls



Emotional Support Seeking By OPAQ for Boys and Girls



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